



Committee on **HOMELAND SECURITY** Chairman Michael McCaul

Opening Statement

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Statement of Subcommittee Chairman Martha McSally (R-Ariz.) Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications

“Strategic Perspectives on the Bioterrorism Threat”

Remarks as Prepared

This morning, the Subcommittee on Emergency Preparedness, Response, and Communications will continue its examination of preparedness for CBRN attacks to the homeland, with a focus on the threat of bioterrorism. It is what I hope will be the first conversation of many that this Subcommittee will hold on biodefense. I intend for us to really dig into all aspects of bio preparedness, both for terrorism and pandemics or other emerging infectious diseases. We received a classified briefing last week on the threat of biological and chemical terrorism. How we prevent and prepare for WMD terrorism is a key area of oversight for the full Committee on Homeland Security as it is for this Subcommittee. Our nation’s capacity to mitigate the impacts of all types of biological events is a top national security priority.

Though many of us are new to this Subcommittee or to Congress, we are not new to the issue of biodefense. I have a personal interest in this area and a background in biology. I deployed six times to combat zones during my military service, with four of those deployments occurring after September 11th. I was deployed in the Middle East during the Anthrax scare in 2001, and I can tell you that even we in the military weren’t prepared for that. On subsequent deployments, I received a number of vaccines to counter biological agents and on my last deployment to Afghanistan they had us taking antibiotics every day to counter the potential for biological attacks on troops.

Obviously, we can’t have everyone in America taking similar precautions every day. That is why it is imperative to have a system in place and exercised to detect, communicate, and respond to these threats, including the distribution of medical countermeasures. We understand that an attack using biological agents or weapons is a low probability, high consequence event. A bio attack could cause illness or death in hundreds of thousands of people, overwhelm our public health capabilities, and have an economic impact of over one trillion dollars per incident. Furthermore, we know there would be myriad significant societal and political consequences. We also understand, thanks to experts such as and including those before us today, that bioterrorist attacks are an urgent and continuing threat.

The Director of National Intelligence testified in February that weapons of mass destruction continue to be a major threat to the security of the U.S. He noted that biological and chemical materials and technologies, as well as personnel with the expertise to use and design them, move easily in the economy. The DNI also stated that infectious disease continues to threaten our security and that a more crowded and interconnected world is increasing the opportunities for human and animal diseases to emerge and spread globally.

The hearing this Subcommittee held last month highlighted challenges related to mass casualty management as it pertains to a major chemical event. Bio would be equally as challenging, with the added problem of illness that takes days or weeks to present symptoms. And because of the legitimate and important life-sciences reasons to do research with biological agents, we may not always be able to stop our enemies from developing a biological weapon. Therefore, we must have a robust preparedness and response infrastructure in place. The ability of our health system to respond is of critical importance.

There has been a lot of solid work in assessing bio preparedness over the years and I'm very grateful to Senator Talent, Co-Chair of the WMD commission, for being here to share this history and discuss why we seem to be almost stuck in place—unable to take steps toward change and enhanced resiliency in this area.

In preparing for today's hearing, I've reviewed this history and I am honestly surprised that some of the recommendations made six and eight years ago have not been implemented, and that even after the Ebola response we cannot seem to identify the federal official who has the responsibility and authority to coordinate the dozen or so senior officials with responsibility for biological preparedness and defense. It's just baffling.

Beyond today's hearing, we'll look at disease surveillance, detection, diagnosis, and reporting. We'll receive a report from the formidable Blue Ribbon Study Panel on Biodefense, which plans to issue recommendations for changes to U.S. law and policy later this year. And we will dive deeper into roles and responsibilities in the biodefense space.

But today is all about the threat. Last year, General Clapper stated that the Intelligence Community assessed that Syria's biological warfare program "might have advanced beyond the research and development stage and might be capable of limited agent production." In addition to the concern of the Syrian regime using biological weapons, we must also be concerned about ISIS getting ahold of them.

As I have stated before, ISIS is better resourced, more brutal, and more organized than any terrorist group to date. We know that they have an interest in using chemical and biological weapons. In fact, a laptop reportedly retrieved from an ISIS hideout in Syria last year contained plans for weaponizing bubonic plague and a document discussing the advantages of using biological weapons.

We have a very distinguished panel of witnesses here today. I am hoping to hear from each of you: What keeps you up at night? How can we best position the Federal government to respond to the threat of a biological attack?

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